

**MINUTES OF THE LOCAL JURISDICTION MEETING OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION
September 24, 2003**

The local jurisdiction meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 8:30 a.m., on September 24, 2003, at Walla Walla Regional Airport Terminal Building, 45 Terminal Loop Road, Walla Walla, Washington.

Commissioners present were: Chair Davis, Chris Marr, Ed Barnes, Elmira Forner Michele Maher and Connie Niva.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Chair Davis and Paula Hammond, Chief of Staff, WSDOT, welcomed meeting participants. Jerry Cummins, Mayor, City of Walla Walla welcomed the Commission and meeting participants. He provided a brief overview of the City of Walla Walla's historical background and its agricultural and economic diversity.

Ms. Hammond introduced Eastern Washington regional administrators Jerry Lenzi, Don Senn and Don Whitehouse and Larry Ehl, Federal Liaison, WSDOT.

Senator Mike Hewitt thanked the Commission for coming to Walla Walla and he looks forward to working with Commissioners in the future.

Senator Larry Sheahan thanked the Commission for coming to Eastern Washington. He commented briefly on freight mobility and statewide transportation concerns.

Scott Gruber and Elizabeth Fleming representing Congressman George Nethercutt welcomed the Commission.

HIGHWAYS (US 12, SR 240)

Don Whitehouse, Regional Administrator, South Central Region, explained that the purpose of the US 12 widening, from SR 124 to the Walla Walla River, is to improve safety, decrease congestion and enhance economic vitality. In 2001 a group of public and private interests met to develop a comprehensive strategy designed to advance Walla Walla Valley's goal of four-laning US 12 from Burbank to Walla Walla. As a result of this meeting the US Highway 12 Coalition was formed. Mr. Whitehouse introduced Jim Kuntz, Executive Director, Port of Walla Walla. Mr. Kuntz was a key player in the formation of the coalition. Due to a Department budget shortfall US 12 funding was at risk. The Coalition members took action and were able to retain funding for phase one of

the project. Phases two through five are funded by the Nickel Package. The Coalition is continuing its efforts to obtain funding for completion of the project. Mr. Whitehouse indicated that the projects are on time and on schedule.

Mayor Jerry Cummins, City of Walla Walla, explained that unsafe passing conditions on US 12 have resulted in numerous accidents over the past ten years.

Senator Hewitt asked if the timeline could be pushed ahead with significant federal funding. Mr. Whitehouse responded that depending on right-of-way acquisitions phases could be under construction within 18 to 20 months.

Mr. Whitehouse briefed the Commission regarding the construction of two new bridges on SR 240. He explained that the purpose of the project is to improve safety, decrease congestion, enhance economic vitality and facilitate alternate modes of transportation. The project will construct additional lanes between Richland and Kennewick and replace the deficient four-lane bridge over the Yakima River. The new bridges will provide additional lanes that will accommodate traffic between I-182 and Columbia Center Boulevard. The project is on schedule and on budget with no major change orders. Groundbreaking is scheduled for July 2005 with an expected completion date of October 2007.

PALOUSE/COULEE CITY SHORT LINE RAILROAD

Ken Uznanski, Manager, WSDOT Rail Office, briefed the Commission regarding the Palouse/Coulee City (PCC) short line railroad. He explained that Eastern Washington depends on the short line as a critical part of its economic development and vitality. The PCC generates enough revenue to cover its operating costs, but does not provide enough to maintain or improve tracks. When the railroad was purchased it already had a maintenance backlog, and now it is time to determine whether to invest in the replacement of several deteriorating lines or abandon the PCC. The PCC saves Washington Shippers millions of dollars per year in lower freight costs holds down charges from other modes of transportation, and avoids millions of dollars per year in secondary highway damage. The basis for considering public acquisition of the PCC is that private rehabilitation funding cannot be obtained and state rehabilitation funds for privately owned railroads must be loans. Currently operating revenues are not sufficient to repay additional loans.

The following justification exists for maintaining the railroad: 20 percent of the state's grain crops move on this line; and 76 customers use the line to move chemicals, frozen foods and lumber with an approximate value of \$160 million per year. If the Department were to move forward with purchase, revenue collected would cover on-going maintenance of the rail lines. State statute requires the Department to demonstrate due diligence in determining whether the benefits exceed costs of the investment.

Expected completion of due diligence is the fall of 2003. The Department is

preparing a report to determine if the system is viable over the next 10 years.

John Love, Commissioner, Port of Whitman County, expressed his concerns regarding the cumulative impacts from the abandonment of major rail lines. Abandonment of these PCC lines could result in an over-reliance on barge and truck transport. The Port has enhanced the competitive advantage of agricultural producers and industries in the region by providing water transportation access, which reduces reliance on overburdened rail car inventories and truck transport. The addition of water transport has placed stress on the capacity of state and county roads in the district. The Port District benefits from the maintenance of adequate rail and road transportation in the District.

Terry Lawhead, Project Manager, Project Services, Department of Community Trade and Economic Development, stated that he works within communities to help expand and recruit businesses. The movement of freight by rail to rural communities provides jobs and valuable transportation of commodities, as well as being cost efficient. He explained that the rail project is critical to communities and he is working on a multi-state collaboration with the Department and the State of Idaho.

Chair Davis asked for a quantification of the cost difference between shipping by truck versus rail. Mr. Uznanski stated that there is a direct cost savings related to shipping by rail.

BARGE SYSTEM – SNAKE/COLUMBIA

Jim Toomey, Executive Director, Port of Pasco, briefed the Commission regarding barge navigation on the Snake/Columbia Rivers. He explained that via the Columbia and Snake River systems are vital for exporting grain. He commented on the comparison of the environmental impacts of moving grain by barge as opposed to semi truck. He provided annual equivalents comparisons of goods moved on rail cars and semi trucks on the Columbia River system. Mr. Toomey commented on the legal challenges of the federal system. The dams on the Columbia/Snake Rivers are operated by the Corps of Engineers and paid for by the federal government. The three major legal challenges that have risen in the last five years are biological opinions, a lawsuit filed under the Clean Water Act and the dredging of the upper Snake River. He explained that dredging of the Snake River channel would not occur until sometime next year.

Senator Larry Sheahan reiterated the importance of dredging on both the lower Snake and Columbia Rivers. Moving goods without utilizing these channels would be very difficult for the market to move wheat, and that would be devastating to the Ports, as well as communities.

Paula Hammond, Chief of Staff, WSDOT, explained that funding is carried forward each biennium and that the State of Oregon has matching funds. Part of the funding for the dredging has been released, but pending lawsuits and environmental challenges have delayed dredging of the lower Columbia River.

TRI-CITIES TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Introductions

Bob Olson, Kennewick Councilman and President, Benton-Franklin Council of Governments. Mr. Olson thanked Commissioner Maher and Don Whitehouse, Regional Administrator, WSDOT Eastern Region, for their participation in local Benton-Franklin-Walla Walla-Regional Transportation Planning Organization and Good Roads meetings.

Metropolitan Issues of Planning and Projects

Mark Kushner, Transportation Director, Benton Franklin Council of Governments, shared the RTPO/MPO Tri-Cities metropolitan focus. He explained that the area is split between three legislative districts. Growth statistics for the area indicate that there has been a 22 percent growth rate over the last 10 years, which is a sign that creative things are happening. Population growth in the area has created commute problems with approximately 90 percent single occupancy commuters. The area is striving to prevent congestion, but there is a regional funding short fall just like everywhere else. Some of the key projects are the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe grade crossings, SR 397/I-82 interchange, SR 240 – 6 lanes and SR 12 – 4 lanes. He stated that approximately half of the traffic flow on the corridors is trucks, and short line haul is critical to the area to aid in preventing further congestion. He outlined funded and unfunded projects in the area. The Benton-Franklin-Walla Walla RTPO is working to conform with the Growth Management Act for transportation, and remain consistent with the Regional Transportation Plan.

Freight and Commuter Rail

Mr. Kushner spoke on behalf of Carol Moser, Richland Councilwoman and RTPO Policy Advisory Committee Chair, extending her appreciation to the Commission for coming to the Tri-Cities, and sharing that the area is still interested in commuter rail, but that it is not economically feasible for Hanford at this time.

Commute Trip Reduction and HOV Lanes

Leo Bowman, Benton County Commissioner and RTPO Vice Chairman, expressed his appreciation to Commissioner Maher for attending RTPO meetings and her support of transportation issues in the area. Mr. Bowman commented regarding the Commute Trip Reduction program (CTR) stating that it is in the best interest of communities to participate in the CTR program to prevent congestion. He commented

that the community is currently participating in CTR and hopes that the program attracts more employers.

Paula Hammond, stated that the 2004 Supplemental Budget request allocated funding to help counties sustain CTR programs.

Senator Mike Hewitt commented that there should be a location for workers to meet and carpool. Employers and workers receive incentives to participate in the CTR program.

Mr. Bowman indicated that he would like to see studies performed in Eastern Washington on the demand for HOV lanes. He also commented regarding Ben Franklin Transit's (BFT) 25 percent decrease in ridership due to the loss of Motor Vehicle Excise Tax. BFT received a .03 percent sales tax increase from local voters, which resulted in five percent increase in ridership. BFT is in the process of completing a comprehensive plan with recommendations in the future. Another issue is the TEA 21 5-month extension. He asked if operations will continue at the same level.

Larry Ehl, Director, Federal Liaison Office, briefed the meeting participants regarding the status of TEA 21. He stated that levels will probably remain current, but there will probably be a five-month extension. It appears that transportation appropriations along with other issues will be rolled into legislation that is called an Omnibus Spending bill, which means that the chairs and ranking members of various committees get together and try to iron out the differences.

Paula Hammond stated that the Department recommended to the TEA 21 Reauthorization Committee that the state continue its current TEA 21 program.

WALLA WALLA TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Appreciation of Current SR 12 Projects, Recognition of Project Partners

Pam Ray, Walla Walla County Commissioner, briefly shared the transportation vision of local communities. In particular she extended their appreciation the of SR 12 project.

Amy Cruz, Public Relations Manager, Boise Cascade Corporation, stated that 80 percent of their employees live in and around the Tri-Cities area, and overall about 700 employees commute on SR 12 daily. SR 12 is a critical link to move products, with 75 trucks making two trips daily. As one of the areas largest employers, Boise Cascade shares in the progress made in the community.

SR 12 – Turning the Corner

Fred Bennett, Port of Walla Walla Commissioner, expressed the Port's appreciation for the four-laning of SR 12. He stated that economic vitality in the area is vital to the Port of Walla Walla. He stated that motorist safety is the primary issue, and he understands that transportation is a never-ending problem. He suggests that several local projects be put into one package.

Greg Tompkins, Walla Walla County Commissioner, thanked the Department and Commission for partnering with the SR 12 Coalition and support of the Nickel Package.

The Myra Road Partnership

Jerry Cummins, Mayor, City of Walla Walla, explained that Myra Road is a divider between the City of College Place and the City of Walla Walla. The community is looking for other ways to connect the two communities with less traffic impact.

Ed Ammon, Mayor, City of College Place, stated that they are looking at a connection routes between College Place and Walla Walla. He explained that you can examine several routes, but modification can occur as the project moves forward.

Hal Thomas, Public Works Director, City of Walla Walla, identified alternate routes for Myra Road. He answered Commissioner's questions regarding highway capacity and funding.

Transportation Funding Issues

Phil Merrell, Public Works Director, Walla Walla County, stated that he is concerned about safety on rural roads. He commented that funding partnerships in the local area between state, federal and county agencies is making all of it work. He stated that voters have sent mixed messages indicating that they want more with less funding. He acknowledged that the Department of Transportation's commitment to accountability has rebuilt the public's trust.

Jim Kuntz, Executive Director, Port of Walla Walla, commented that accountability and the Nickel gas tax was critical, and that the Department and Commission are on the right track in completing projects on time and on budget.

AVIATION

Stan Allison, Manager, WSDOT Aviation Operations, provided a briefing regarding economic relationships between airports and communities.

Larry Adams, Manager, Walla Walla Regional Airport, stated that the airport is a commercial service airport operated by the Port of Walla Walla. The airport plays a significant role in the local economy. The airport experienced a reduction of flights that will require airport customers to go elsewhere to meet their travel needs. As flights decline the services provided by the airport will decline. This may cause air traffic control to be discontinued, which could be a safety issue. If commercial service discontinues at the airport it will severely limit the access to FAA Airport Improvement Funds. Walla Walla Regional Airport is a critical regional resource to transportation on the eastern side of the state and as an emergency natural disaster asset.

Jim Morris , Director, Tri-Cities Airport, stated that the airport is located in Franklin County, two miles northwest of Pasco. The airport contributes heavily to economic activity in the area. It is currently undergoing a terminal expansion that will expand the passenger boarding area enabling passengers to be more efficiently processed through ticketing. Mr. Morris explained the variety of services that the airport provides to its customers. He commented that the new aviation outreach program is great.

UPDATE ON PREPARATIONS FOR THE LEWIS & CLARK BICENTENNIAL

Judy Lorenzo, Transportation Planner & Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Liaison, Policy Development & Regional Coordination Office, shared the status of the Lewis and Clark Trail Highway and the upcoming Bicentennial preparations. She provided a summary of accomplishments and look to the future. 2003 is a milestone year for our state because the Washington State Legislature appropriated one million dollars to the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. These funds will be awarded to local communities and tribal nations on a competitive basis in 2003 to build key projects. The Washington State Historical Society is the steward of these funds. Washington and Oregon are teaming up to host the 11th National Bicentennial Signature Event – Destination: The Pacific. This event will take place in November 2005 stretching from Long Beach, Washington to Cannon Beach, Oregon.

PUBLIC AND LEGISLATOR COMMENT PERIOD

Judy Olson, Representing Senator Patty Murray, thanked the Commission for coming to Southeast Washington and Walla Walla. Senator Murray appreciates all of the work that the Commission does throughout the state.

Ross Dundee, County Engineer and Public Works Director, Benton County, commented that it is critical for the Department to communicate with cities and counties. The Nickel Package projects do help cities and counties, although Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds need to go to cities and counties.

Senator Mike Hewitt, expressed that transportation is an issue where a state perspective is critical. Communication builds trust and there is a huge disconnect with the public. There is a need to convince the public that these projects are necessary.

Ken Nelson, Economic Development Director, Kennewick, stated that the region appreciates the change in culture within the Department. He commented there are programs out there that are important and must be balanced with the mega projects.

Dick Fondahn, General Manager, Walla Walla Valley Transit, stated that funding for transit impacts people's lives in the community.

Jean Dalling, citizen, commented regarding the dangerous condition of Hwy 12. She provided comments regarding the struggle between limited access and commercial developers on Myra Road.

The Commission meeting adjourned at 4:45 p.m. on September 24, 2003.